

## A Few Thoughts on a Few Notes

Page 147 (working backwards, starting at the end of a second reading): "experiencing 'spirit'": this has to be the starting point: not (p. 125, the first page of the essay): "Of course 'spirit' is a topic that should produce squeamishness". This whole paragraph ("Of course 'spirit' is a topic that should produce squeamishness. In poetry, it is one of many areas that have been compromised by a contaminated, habit-ridden rhetoric. Like 'personal expression' or an ego-based lyricism or linear personal narrative, 'spirit' has become a too easily learned mainstream craft. In the case of 'spirit', the commodification via advertising and pop culture is all too apparent, whether under the rubric of 'New Age' or the more blatantly commodified forms of 'inner world' self-improvement programs and retreats. But in each of these cases, an avant-garde or innovative poetry might indeed be throwing out the baby with the bath water if these topics and concerns are altogether avoided simply because of the obviousness of a contaminated rhetoric.") is exactly accurate, but the point is tertiary to the subject at hand. Page 147: experiencing spirit: the word is difficult to use primarily because it is the wrong word: from *spiritus*, breath, which is more to the point where the discipline is under discussion, the spiritual discipline being very much a fineness of attention (p.134) and including at least in part and at times a discipline of the breath, more *pneuma* than *spiritus*: spirit - n. 1.a. *The vital principle or animating force within living beings.* b. *Incorporeal consciousness.* 2. The soul, considered as departing from the body of a person at death. 3. Spirit. The Holy Spirit. 4. Spirit. Christian Science. God. 5. *A supernatural being, as: a. An angel or a demon.* b. *A being inhabiting or embodying a particular place, object, or natural phenomenon.* c. *A fairy or sprite.* 6.a. *The part of a human being associated with the mind, will, and feelings: Though unable to join us today, they are with us in spirit.* b. *The essential nature of a person or group.* 7. *A person as characterized by a stated quality: He is a proud spirit.* 8.a. *An inclination or a tendency of a specified kind: Her actions show a generous spirit.* b. *A causative, activating, or essential principle: The couple's engagement was announced in a joyous spirit.* 9. *spirits.* *A mood or an emotional state: The guests were in high spirits. His sour spirits put a damper on the gathering.* 10. *A particular mood or an emotional state characterized by vigor and animation: sang with spirit.* 11. *Strong loyalty or dedication: team spirit.* 12. *The predominant mood of an occasion or a period: "The spirit of 1776 is not dead" (Thomas Jefferson).* 13. *The actual though unstated sense or significance of something: the spirit of the law.* 14. *Often spirits. (used with a sing. verb). An alcohol solution of an essential or volatile substance.* 15. *spirits.* *An alcoholic beverage, especially distilled liquor. —spirit - tr.v. 1. To carry off mysteriously or secretly: The documents had been spirited away.* 2. *To impart courage, animation, or determination to; inspire.* A few of these definitions are tangentially (or contiguously, as metonymy) or metaphorically apt. I include them all as an offering of the kind of noise from which we must always sort any pertinent signal (as is always the case with this sort of selection, which is what makes it as interesting as it is exasperating — it's not so much a process of meaning-building as of meaning-selection — I would almost certainly highlight other definitions if I were to go through this procedure again). Incorporeal consciousness is probably the most useful of these twenty or so attempts, though "incorporeal" is problematic even while being accurate enough (there isn't a single word for "having, as metaphor, in language, a 'body' of an order entirely different from that of materiality, atemporal and nonlocal, though, when 'manifest', palpably, powerfully, overwhelmingly 'present'", or if there is, I don't know it). Spirit, then, or *spirit*, or [spirit], while present in language as language, presents a very specific set of difficulties (the set of all [spiritual] experiences not included in the set of all signifieds, to suggest one possible set). *Pneuma* - n., from *pneumat*- "wind", "the soul or vital spirit", is not much better, if any better, though it does at least remind me of the lightwind in infinite void (language stops just this side of touching it, as always in these areas), and pneumatic includes this definition, *having cavities filled with air, as the bones of certain birds*, which might be useful if one were still willing to attempt a deep image or surrealist

representation of "[spirit]" in the poem. One can come away from psiritual (a typo, but I'll let it stand) experience with a sense of having received an injunction against speaking of the matter, a prohibition against representation (p. 146), if you will, or, to borrow from Lacoue-Labarthe's explanation, quoted on page 147, an injunction prohibiting anything that can be clearly said about the perceiving of (in) the experience — of the during of the experiencing. This, at least in certain instances (perhaps in much of the work that makes up those "strands of poetry" — p. 148 — which "can be viewed as successive modes of address and successive approximations"), begins to intimate a set of intentions and difficulties underlying the poem's "refusal to 'mean' directly" (p. 138). At its extreme, this strand of poetry enacts such a radical refusal of meaning, perhaps even of writing, even of language, that it fully resists any attempt to contextualize it as having specifically a pertinence to poetry.

The experience of spirit can be seen as the experience of an excess of meaning so radical that it annihilates the site of that meaning. And the experience as remembered becomes secondary to the actual 'experience', and if recounted, whether written as poetry or otherwise recounted, it becomes in language a tertiary experience. This is the case, to borrow from Bird's assessment, whether we are working as birds or as ornithologists (p. 136). Poetry can be seen as a primary vehicle for the manifestation of, the incursion of, the divine wholly other sacred no thing in(to) the world. Spirit and materiality are absolutely different orders of Being, but materiality can be transmuted into spirit, and spirit can materialize in forms that are knowable to the human mind (spirit does not manifest as the *absolutely* unknowable, clearly, else no one would have ever mentioned it even as a potentiality or a passing fancy). Spirit comes as a gift to take from us its necessities. Given Deren's understanding of Voudoun ("The loa, whose function is to direct the enormous primal mass of the material universe into patterns of intelligence and benevolence, are involved in a great and endless labor. It is their moral energy which animates this huge bulk of matter, and so, since that energy is constantly expended, it must be constantly replenished. And this is man's duty: to feed the loa, to insure the constant flow of the psychic energy, to assure the moral movement of the universe." And: "To be made aware, once more, that man is of divine origin and is the issue of and heir to an uncounted multitude of hearts and minds; that at the root of the universe the great imperturbable principles of cosmic good endure; and that even under his torn shirt, his hunger, the failures of his wit and the errors of his heart, his very blood harbors these monumental loa — is to experience the major blessing with which possession rewards men's dedicated service." — p. 141), it comes as no surprise that Jake Berry is willing to state that "Voudoun seems to have all the right elements with little or none of the kind of moral strictures that the heavy orthodoxies have", and, further, that "the transcendental reality is there certainly enough and it must inform everything, since everything is its expression and vehicle, but there are many details and these take on bodies, sometimes human bodies. Possession is just a natural completion of the human drive toward the divine, and the divine toward human".

Page 141: "The poet as a gateway to a *multitude* of forces and beings is a foundational premise for *Brambu Drezi*, as is the reality (and peril) of possession, an experience that is often marked in Berry's text by glossolalia and by the way that the text constantly remains outside the control of its author."

1. — These multitudes of forces and beings are as experientially 'real' as is this keyboard I am using to type these notes. Many readers, and many poets, seem unwilling to accept this, but I am far from the first to say it: when these forces and beings are present in a poem, they are not intended as poetry, as metaphor, as image, as representation, they are intended as forces and beings. The failure of many poetic (and artistic) attempts in these areas comes from the attempt to convey in direct or evocative language experiences of beings and forces which are not susceptible to this kind of representation in the world (language through the millennia has not acquired a structure designed

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for the presentation or conveyance or evocation of these forces and beings — it has had instead encoded in its design a radical pragmatism, an agenda developed to facilitate daily social interaction, and while its polysemous excesses and general slipperiness serve to subvert this agenda, it remains without parallel powerfully the instrument of sustenance and nourishment for the maintenance of an only gradually varying fiction we collectively embrace under such banners as "reality" and "common sense" — but this radical pragmatism also has another sense, subversive and spiritual, one in which language is turned against itself, so that which is normally occluded by language is opened in an altered language, or, more precisely, the mechanisms of the brain which are entrained through language to occlusion are retrained in an altered language to apprehension of realities under normal circumstances occluded, the radically pragmatic epistemology of language is subverted so as to realign pragmatism itself as that which is in radical opposition to pragmatism normatively understood, and new experiential epistemologies of among other things spirit are evidenced by language, in language, through language, as extremes of language acting against itself.). Bly's formulaic rhetoric of ephiphanic writing (p. 127) fails due to this misrepresentation (whether brought on by misunderstanding or desperation, the result is the same), as does the Emersonian "Nature as a storehouse (or factory) for symbols" (p.126) (Emerson comes much closer when writing of the poet's 'resigning himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms, and accompanying that'). 2 — The peril of possession is absolutely real — among other things, the annihilation of the self doesn't necessarily seem reversible — and that peril remains if not exactly present at least nearby after the actual experience has passed. And poetry, as a spiritual discipline, as that fineness of attention, hones the poet's capacity for being in the presence of that peril. The poem itself does not come into being as a means of providing the experience of that peril, though it might approximate such a provision, nor does it come into being as a discussion of that peril. The poem of spirit comes into being as a result of the fact that the poet who writes it has had the experience of that peril. And the poet, in the writing of the poem of spirit, enters into the proximity or presence of that peril. The self (as imagined under normative circumstances) is only approximately a causal agency in this eventuation. Thus, for one thing, "the text constantly remains outside the control of its author". The poem is "radically released from mastery", and "the poet clearly exists in subordination to a greater reality (...) where the poem is released from the performance and will of one's individual intentions" (p. 141). The writing of the poem of spirit is not primarily about writing or poetry. It participates in poetry because, as writing, it has nowhere else to go. Poetry, therefore, or certain strands of it, comes to contain certain poets who are only as it were by default involved in the writing of poetry. Poetry thus becomes one of the few ways in which spirit is able to perform the "endless labor" of directing "the enormous primal mass of the material universe into patterns of intelligence and benevolence". Poetry is a site through which spirit enters materiality, of this I think we need have no uncertainty — but this is an absolute extreme of poetry, and the poems which comprise this strand of poetry are, as all poetry is an aberrant use of language, aberrant uses of poetry itself. 3 — Glossolalia, particularly as rendered in Berry's poem, is more akin to some of the inscriptions on ancient magical papyri than to the current notion of "speaking in tongues" As Patricia Cox Miller has written, "using language against itself by breaking it down into its elemental parts and then reconfiguring those parts in endless permutations and combinations, the magical prayers constitute an iconoclastic piety". Some of the neologisms ("alogisms" might be more accurate) in *Brambu Drezi*, as well as some of the lists and strings of letters there, give the sense not so much of prayers of iconoclastic piety (though there certainly is that) as of poetry at its absolute extreme refusing utterly to signify and in some instances even sound.

Page 137: Ed Foster: "poetry ... is responsible to itself and in every other context answerable to none." This is exactly the case with a poetry, a writing, of the spirit. It is in fact exactly the case with

the "phenomenology of experiencing 'spirit'" (p. 147). Sometimes it seems to elude us that the world, the universe, materiality does not exist for us, and is not in all its aspects subject to the scale of human values, and that spirit might well have an other entirely non-human scale of values as it were, an agenda even which while it includes us does not posit humanity as its end-point. If a poetry of spirit is to be answerable to anything, it may well be to this.

Page: 137: "One other answer to the question of poetry to and for whom would be the Hebrew word *leeshma* — for its own sake. As Taggart concludes, 'word is found in what comes after', and the issues of specific address, of the poem and poet's participation in a socially mediated matrix of institutions, certifications, and circulations, are after-effects that should not impinge upon the moment when the poet is able to 'do the do'". This 'for its own sake' must have as its premise the fact that the poetry of spirit exists at least in one of its aspects as an actual instance of spirit invading, infecting, intruding upon materiality. Thus, to say this poetry is for its own sake would be to say, as one possibility in this context, that it is for itself as uniquely the poetry of spirit, it is a feeding of the loa, and is for that.

From "penumbral hybrids", written shortly after my first reading of "Returns: Innovative Poetry and Questions of 'Spirit'":

Writing spirit (please note the absence of quotation marks) has nothing to do with either a lineage or a context where both are imagined as literary and/or artistic in any way. I have over the past five or six years, mostly in conversation with Ken Harris, proposed an alternative lineage for *Brambu Drezi* which would progress, beginning with Romanticism, along the line of Blake through Rimbaud through Artaud to Berry, a genealogy of "intensely individualistic" explorers, to say the least. But those who work on the writing of spirit have no need and indeed no use for lineages and contexts, not even flimsily constructed alternative ones like mine. I won't win any ideological fashion awards for attempting to make this point, but if the writing of poetry is in fact a spiritual discipline (and it certainly is for some), then the significant outcome of that practice has to do with its spiritual implications for the poet, the implications for what it might mean to be human and in the world, and not with its poetical productions which pale to utter insignificance in comparison. This is bad news for literature, and indeed for the entire literature/education complex, along with its adjuncts publishing/manufacturing and purveyance/distribution. The loss of all this would not be a great loss. What would be a devastating, an insurmountable, loss would be the loss of "intensely individualistic" poets who continue to write spirit without any regard for that writing *as it specifically relates to literature*. This statement has nothing to say one way or the other about the art and craft of writing poems; it has perhaps a little to say about the setting of priorities that seem obvious enough to this poet.

Traditions, lineages and contexts, no matter how alternative, whether self-taught, outside or visionary, are simply not pertinent to the practice of writing spirit. They are, however, essential to the process of reading written spirit, particularly if that reading is to be a writing of a reading. We seem to think that the creation of these lineages and contexts is somehow useful in relation to *writing* spirit. It isn't. The ancillary texts act as a substitute for the actual writing, and they spawn an at best tertiary writing of the "spirit", a writing which is actually the writing of a longing and a loss.

With this we are back to Bird's care for the ornithologists of jazz. The critical writing is simply too far removed from the experience which it purports to address — even the primary writing of spirit, the poem itself, is almost disastrously distant from the experience which prompts the writing. The

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critique offered here, it goes without saying, would apply to my writing of this essay as much as to any other attempt at writing *about* this area of experience.

It was almost immediately clear to me that the section of "Penumbral Hybrids" that addressed the "Returns" was insufficient, not only insufficient as a response to the essay, but insufficient as even a partial accounting of my own engagement with this subject. The critical essay as an approach to the writing of spirit will inevitably arrive at an aporia, not just the logical dead end of its approach, but the necessary end-point of its capacity to write even towards this subject. To follow the essay to that point, to the multiple recognitions which constitute that aporia, is the most that can be endeavored in the essay form. (The "Returns" at several points seems to go as far as an essay is able to go.) The essay as a form ends as it were at the edge of an enormous gulf, gazing out across an alluring emptiness at the elusive object of its pursuit. Language normally construed and used (as contrasted with Wittgenstein's "Do not forget that a poem, though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information."), as it is almost always in the essay form, simply cannot cross this gulf to touch and tell of the experience not just of the written poem of spirit, and also not just of the poet's experience of writing the poem of spirit, but most importantly the experience of spirit itself. Language used in the game of giving information is not capable of presenting the experience, nor is it capable of evoking the experience, nor is it capable of producing a record of having certainly had this experience. Language breaks down at the edge of this gulf: beyond this end-point there can be no further giving of information. From a great distance the essay is written as desire, not as an experience of spirit nor even as a record of that experience. The language commonly used to discuss or present a writing of spirit is contaminated in more ways than one: it is contaminated in the popular commodities of spirit offered by the New Age, it is contaminated by the posturings of politicians on both ends and in the middle of the political spectrum, it is contaminated by the privileged mediators of the predominant religious institutions (poetry's heresy is its refusal to accept the need for mediation), and it is corrupted by the casual chatter of people whose culturally-constructed epiphanies have been construed by them as mystical revelations — but it is also contaminated by the best of intentions — I'll let the word stand here, in the company of authentic and sincere, without the aid of quotation marks — and indeed by the best of language usage, for the language of spirit is not a language useful in any social context, it is already entirely outside, an outsider art of language, when it begins its approach to the address of spirit.

The poetry of spirit might require a language radically 'contaminated'. It is an infusion of the utterly alien into language, a fundamental corruption of language, a necessary betrayal. If the poetry of spirit could be taken on a mass scale as an ideal of language in its utter impurity, the methods and materials, the means by which reality and identity are constructed, would be utterly undermined, the very laws of physics would seem like obscure and antiquated jokes or amusing riddles. As long as we are working with language as an attempt at giving information, as we must be in an essay, it makes no sense to say — the world is not the world — it isn't simply that it's partial, it's that it is a complete and a calculated fiction — it is the exact fiction as it must be if we are to live in it as we do — detachment is a fundamental first step towards thinking a way out of this — detachment from our cherished fictions, primarily the materiality of ourselves and of our world, their solidity, predictability, continuity — here we are reminded too strongly of the fiction of death — the experience of spirit is the experience of the annihilation of all of our attachments — the main thing, things: not to forget, not to lie, not to flinch — but it is not possible for the world as we know it, for humans as we know them, to embrace this annihilation — there would no longer be a world as we know it, and no longer humans as we know them — a poetry of spirit attempts to 'say'

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these kinds of things in ways which will allow them at least the possibility of being heard. In the context of an essay, these kinds of statements must appear as almost incomprehensible absurdities.

The poet loses 'control' of the poem willfully, willingly, by choice, through a series of choices, but this is not an abandonment of 'control', it is an exercise of extreme 'control', an ability acquired through discipline and practice, after the experience of spirit and as a participant in spirit, as one who carries that experience with him, and this loss of 'control' is a very specific kind of loss, it is the kind of loss that is simultaneously a gain, the attainment of a mastery of the art of losing 'control', so that the direction of that loss will not be towards randomness and chaos, but towards a very particular variety of receptivity, a receptivity of language and through language to the experience of spirit. Language at this extreme of experience does not present itself as normative language, nor does it present itself in the canonical conventions of poetry, and it doesn't present itself as the language of any Church, nor of any salesman, nor of any ideology or agenda, it presents itself as language radically against itself, language exploded and imploded under the pressures of experience and meanings which language structurally is not designed to facilitate or convey. Entrance into this potentiality, this potency, of language is exactly analogous to entrance into the varieties of possession mentioned by Deren — and the perils are much the same. Language makes materiality cohere. The experience of spirit is the absolute disintegration of materiality. Language also disintegrates, explodes, fragments into its fundamental units, sounds and letters. Signification as such is not a certainty at this site. The giving of information is not an issue. Language exploded, disintegrated, is more capable of carrying spirit, and the experience of spirit, than is any kind of 'useful' language conventionally construed. We might say that the loa can ride the language as long as the language is not also bearing the burden of signification. The perils here are as real as breath and dirt: the shape and solidity of space can no longer be taken as givens; the progressive and cumulative continuity of time can no longer be taken as a given. To simply say or write non-local and atemporal is insufficient to enact in language a territory wherein the experience of spirit is available (if for no other reason than that we are likely to attempt a context of the non-local and a lineage of the atemporal). The self is annihilated, and there is no longer a recognizable world for it to inhabit — the experience of spirit is a passing through of the phase transition from materiality to spirit — and in the awareness which impossibly remains there is a terrifying beauty, the recognition that there is in fact no going back to a world exactly recognizable and intact.

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